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## Chapter 21 Rural Victims of Crime

### Section 7

#### Abstract

This section examines the unique challenges that confront victims in rural areas. In South Carolina, 36 of 46 counties are rural resulting in nearly 75 percent of the state is designated as rural. Numerous barriers specific to rural victims must be overcome in order to provide adequate victim services. Remoteness, lack of services and funding and isolation limits accessibility and quality of necessary services that are more easily available to urban victims. Identification of challenges that face rural populations will enable participants to tailor victim service programs to meet the needs of victims who reside in remote areas. Additionally, concerns of specific victim populations, such as victims of Hispanic descent will be addressed. Promising practices developed to meet the needs of victims in rural regions will be examined.

#### Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, participants will be able to:

- Identify the misconceptions that are frequently associated with rural communities
- Understand the financial and structural challenges that confront remote jurisdictions
- Address the cultural differences that characterize rural residents
- Identify concerns that are unique to Hispanic victims, domestic violence victims and rural college campuses
- Understand the distinctions between rural and urban law enforcement and VSP agencies
- Assess and compare national efforts to improve rural victims' assistance
- Evaluate promising practices that various agencies have adopted

#### Listing of Topics

- Rural Perspectives
- Unique Challenges of Rural Victims
- Domestic Violence Concerns
- Rural Campus Concerns
- Rural Law Enforcement And Victim Assistance
- Federal Victims' Assistance Initiatives

*Appendix A: Barriers to Services for Rural Victims of Crime*

*Appendix B: The Creator Wheel*

## **RURAL PERSPECTIVES**

Approximately one-third of all Americans (31.2%) live in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> In South Carolina, almost the reverse is true. With such a significant rural population and increasing rural crime rates, many South Carolina VSP are constantly challenged to examine the accessibility and effectiveness of the services provided in remote regions. To successfully serve victims of crime, this large portion of South Carolinians cannot be excluded or neglected from receiving the support and advocacy they are entitled to and indeed, deserve.

### **Rural Misconceptions & Dynamics**

Although rural crime rates have traditionally been lower than urban crime rates, patterns of rural crime now indicate both the exporting of urban problems to rural areas and problems that are unique to rural areas.<sup>2</sup> In fact, statistics from 1997 reveal that violent crimes dropped 6.2% in cities with populations of over one million, while rural counties experienced a 3.1% increase.<sup>3</sup> Demographically speaking, rural is described as a geographic area 10 or more miles from a population center of 30,000 people or more, or as a region with fewer than six residents per square mile.

Economic problems facing rural areas increasingly affect the nature and extent of crime. The lack of resources available to remote regions to respond to crime and to assist victims has enormous impacts on the community. Budget shortfalls force judges to frequently incarcerate criminals rather than sentence them to treatment and other alternative programs, as few community-sentencing programs exist in rural areas. Budget cuts to state and local system-based programs such as law enforcement, Department of Corrections, prosecutor-based programs, have also caused a lack of response and services to crime victims. Budget issues affect non-profit agencies in the same way as a portion of agency operating costs are funded through donations. Further, there are fewer businesses, corporations and other major funding sources available in rural areas.

In addition, aspects of the rural culture may affect crime victims' willingness to report violence and to participate in the criminal justice system. Often times, theft and other non-person crimes are never reported to the police and are instead handled informally. Confidentiality is a huge issue in communities that often number fewer than 1,000 per town or unincorporated areas. Protecting confidentiality can be a major struggle in a rural community, which is especially important when devising a safety plan.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Edmunds and Wallace, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> FBI, 1998.

Remoteness is also connected to the shortages of services. Some South Carolina counties have limited mental health services, few medical facilities, few social services agencies and few attorneys. The challenges faced by VSP to obtain necessary, safe and impartial assistance for victims is enormous.

While geographical and economical shortfalls certainly impede the effectiveness of victims' services, many cultural issues that are predominately rural also create difficulties for victims. Traditional belief systems prevail in rural communities and these beliefs are often misogynistic and narrow-minded. Many families maintain the shroud of secrecy and believe that the criminal justice system will not effectively handle the situation. Further, rural cultures often place value on resolving their own issues.

Distance is not the only frustration for rural victims; their isolated residence may also impede their ability to access support services that would otherwise be available to urban victims. Law enforcement's response to crime can take more time, given the size of the county and the number of available officers. Attending a support group is challenging due to distance, lack of transportation and the fact that the nearest co-participant may live many miles away.

## **UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF RURAL VICTIMS**

Within the rural community, there are a number of sub-groups that confront their own set of challenges. Tribal communities, victims of domestic violence and victims on rural campuses face unique problems when reporting criminal activity, discussing their victimization and seeking support and protection.

### **Tribal Concerns**

Violence on tribal lands is one of the most pressing issues in modern society. A 1999 Bureau of Justice Statistics report on crime and victimization among American Indians found that the rate of violent victimization estimated from responses by American Indians is well above that of other U.S. racial or ethnic subgroup and is more than twice as high as the national average.<sup>4</sup>

Frequently members of tribal nations often feel alienated from the rest of the country and cannot relate to the local criminal justice system. Sentiments of oppression are not uncommon, stemming from the long history of segregation of Native Americans. The cultural values of tribal nations differ significantly from those of the rest of the country. As a culture that is dedicated to observing many traditions and rituals, tribal groups often have their own definition of justice, which is unlike that of the local government. Many believe that the injustice that has befallen a member of their tribe should be handled by the tribe, rather than the criminal justice system.

Victims of family and gang violence who reside on tribal lands are often overwhelmed by the geographical and jurisdictional issues inherent in tribal justice processes. Confusing and often counterproductive jurisdictional boundaries exist among state, federal and tribal laws. The result can be chaos for the victim in need of services.

For many tribal family violence victims, simply traveling to the local police station to make a report can be an extreme challenge because of the distance, lack of transportation and time involved in making such a trip. Transportation issues are especially critical for elderly victims and for children who attend therapy. Many tribal crime victims must travel hundreds of miles to participate in the criminal justice process, making their involvement in the process nearly impossible.

### **Hispanic Victim Concerns**

The Hispanic population has grown significantly in South Carolina. According to Census estimates, South Carolina was the state with the third highest Hispanic population growth rate, with an estimated 140,000 thousand (Census Bureau,

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<sup>4</sup> Greenfeld and Smith, 1999.

2006). However, experts estimate that this is a gross underestimate and that a more likely estimate could be over 400,000. Employment opportunities in agricultural work, meat packing and poultry plants, and other industries have attracted significant numbers of Hispanics. Higher concentrations of Hispanics reside in the areas surrounding Saluda, Newberry, and Greenwood counties. Employment and less expensive cost of living often attract Hispanics to rural areas of the state. Hispanics living in these communities share many of the same struggles of other rural residents (e.g., limited services, transportation). However, Hispanic victims of crime can also experience other challenges, including limited English proficiency, limited understanding of the criminal justice system and victim services, and distrust of government agencies. These challenges can reduce the likelihood that some Hispanic victims will fully participate in the criminal justice process and/or access victim services. Consequently, many victims in need of services do not receive them. In addition, hesitancy about reporting crimes and assisting with prosecution can result in Hispanics communities experiencing a continued or even an increased risk of criminal victimization (e.g., Hispanics being targeted for robbery because they are less likely to have bank accounts and more likely to have cash on hand.).

The challenges that Hispanics victims of crime face in our state result in challenges to victims service providers to assist these victims. Often, efforts must be made to address barriers directly in order to address victim needs. For example, trust issues can be addressed with outreach efforts through trusted agencies (e.g., churches with Hispanic congregations, community based organizations that serve the Hispanic community), through community involvement (e.g., having a presence and distributing information at health fairs or cultural events), and/or through Hispanic media (e.g., newspaper, radio, television). In addition, victim service materials can be translated into Spanish and distributed. Such efforts can begin to break down problems with trust and can increase knowledge regarding the criminal justice system and victim services.

### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CONCERNS**

Currently, one out of three rural counties has fewer than 10,000 residents which present a significant challenge in establishing even basic services for crime victims, such as counseling for child abuse victims and shelters for battered women. For many rural domestic violence victims seeking safety, the remoteness of their community and lack of shelters creates a major barrier in leaving their batterer. Often times, the nearest shelter may be several communities and many miles away, forcing the victim to leave whatever support network is available and taking children out of school in order to reach safety.

Again, residing in remote areas may also increase the response time and the speed that law enforcement and emergency services are able to respond to

victims' calls for assistance. Usually officers and medical personnel wait longer for back up when responding to domestic violence calls, which often forces the on-site personnel to make difficult decisions. This further jeopardizes the safety of the victim and may delay critical emergency responses.

Limited access to telephone services, high unemployment rates as well as lack of low-income housing and childcare services create substantial challenges for women who are attempting to flee their domestic violence situation.

Overall, the issues of rural family violence and rural justice have not received national attention in the development of policies and protocol for law enforcement or other areas of the criminal justice system. In light of the relative scarcity of resources in remote areas, the need for collaboration within the criminal justice system and neighboring communities is critical. It is essential that victim service programs target the identification of other service organizations and criminal justice agencies that are available for and/or interested in coordinating and collaborative efforts. The unique needs of rural victims must be viewed with an eye toward unusual and creative solutions that maximize current community and neighboring area resources.

### **RURAL CAMPUS CONCERNS**

The basic demographics of rural campuses contribute to limited availability and accessibility of victim services. Campuses tend to be smaller and less connected to the community than those in urban or suburban settings. Confidentiality is of great concern when reporting crimes, as everyone tends to know each other and word spreads quickly. Victims more likely to know their offenders, which can pose additional confidentiality and protection concerns. Additionally, services for offenders (such as treatment, rehabilitation and community supervision) are limited as well.

The homogenous demographics of some rural-remote campuses can pose challenges to providing quality, supportive services to victims who do not match the general characteristics of the student population. Students of color may be in greater jeopardy, both in their chances of being victimized and in reporting crimes and receiving supportive services.

Although 80 percent of the United States is classified as rural, there are fewer infrastructures available to support public safety and victim service initiatives in such jurisdictions. Traditionally, a majority of the funding for such services has been population-based. Fortunately, this is changing.

In some rural jurisdictions, experimentation with alcohol and other drugs begins at earlier ages, as there are fewer forms of entertainment. Guns may be more prevalent and there may be a false sense of security among campus residents

and attendees because crime rates in rural areas have historically tended to be lower than in urban or suburban jurisdictions. As previously discussed, these rates are changing with the increasing prevalence of gang- and drug-related activities in rural regions.

Victim-related issues at religious institutions of higher education can be complex. There are concerns that victims may be partially or fully blamed for their victimization and that victims who are unable or unwilling to forgive the perpetrator may be alienated or ex-communicated.

## **RURAL LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES**

Law enforcement services are much more limited in remote-rural jurisdictions. There are fewer officers who are trained in investigations, laws and services relevant to crime victims. Law enforcement officers may be less knowledgeable about victim-related issues and may not receive adequate training regarding victims' assistance and rights.

Furthermore, units that specialize in specific crimes such as domestic violence and sexual assault may be lacking or absent. The availability of crime labs and forensic units is limited, resulting in more reliance on state agencies, which can cause significant delays in case processing.

While these shortfalls create a disadvantage for crime victims, there are some positive elements of rural law enforcement agencies. In smaller communities a victim may be more likely to know somebody in law enforcement and can quickly call for assistance. There may also be greater informal social controls that contribute to fewer crimes committed, as well as a tendency of community members to look out for each other. Additionally, citizen involvement and awareness can be high.

### **Rural Victims' Assistance**

One of the most frustrating aspects of nearby victim service programs serving rural populations is lack of resources and transportation issues. VSP confront major challenges when trying to establish rapport and trust with the victims they serve. Lack of personal contacts, due to the long distances between them, can hinder the trust-building process. It often takes VSP who serve rural victims much longer to gain trust and create a relationship that encourages discussion, healing and feels safe to the victim.

Lack of community resources can be an ongoing frustration for VSP, as they are unable to provide referrals to support groups, shelters and other related services that are normally available to urban victims. Inadequate training may

also be a problem for rural victim service programs, which are often short-handed and frequently face funding challenges.

Despite these challenges, rural victim service programs do possess a number of strengths that are specific to rural communities.

- Federal grants are available to support rural programs and coordinate community responses
- There are additional resources available if programs partner with a tribal agency
- Rural programs are usually more successful in enlisting agricultural, civic and religious organizations in crime prevention campaigns
- Rural programs are better at auditing their community for safety and accountability
- More tightly knit communities often witness more collaboration of community agencies
- Smaller populations can be advantageous for managing and gaining familiarity of crime, caseloads and case parties

### **FEDERAL VICTIMS' ASSISTANCE INITIATIVES<sup>5</sup>**

Rural Domestic Violence and Child Victimization Enforcement Grants at the Office of Justice Programs improve and increase services available to rural women and children by encouraging community involvement in developing coordinated responses to domestic violence and child abuse. One federal grant program is the STOP (Services Training Officers Prosecutors) Violence Against Women Formula Grant Program that awards funds to states and territories to restructure and strengthen the criminal justice system's response to violence against women.

The STOP grant facilitated the development of the Farm Worker Women Leadership Project in California, which developed a model for identifying farm worker women in California communities to receive training in sexual assault and domestic violence awareness, prevention strategies and available resources. In turn, these women train others in their communities about these issues.

Four percent of the amount budgeted each year for the STOP Violence Against Women Formula Grant Program is awarded to Indian tribal governments. One such grant was awarded to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservations Court Appointed Special Advocates Program, which is located in Montana. Through an interagency agreement with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime funded the Tribal Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Program in Indian Country. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation CASA

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<sup>5</sup> National Victim Assistance Academy Training Manual, 2002. Office for Victims of Crime, Washington, D.C.



Program is a model program and has established groundbreaking precedence in utilizing volunteers to assist child victims in remote areas of Indian Country. The Program made a determination that having a volunteer program would improve and enhance the quality of the representation and assure that the tribal court could make decisions in the best interests of the child. The Tribal CASA Program has been successfully recruiting, training and supervising volunteers. The program has been providing community education concerning the program and exploring possible financial resources to assist the program, such as the use of tribal court filing fees and fines to pay for CASA volunteer expenses.

Another national organization that aims to improve services for rural crime victims is the National Grange, which is the oldest nationwide agricultural and rural public interest organization in the United States. With over 300,000 Grange members affiliated with 3,600 local, county and state Grange chapters, the organization has been instrumental in promoting community collaboration and augmentation of victim services throughout the nation. The National Grange sponsors numerous initiatives that promote victims' rights and public safety.

Grange members, like all rural citizens, cherish being secure in their homes, free of crime and fear. However, crime is increasingly making its way into rural communities. Urban street gangs extend their influence into rural towns to recruit new members. Drug dealers use rural locations to manufacture toxic drugs to poison youth. Rural communities are inadequately prepared to recognize, prevent and address occurrences of domestic violence. The basic rights of violent crime victims in rural areas go unprotected. Rural law enforcement agencies, often under-funded and under-trained to deal with these threats and challenges, strain to provide basic public safety.

The National Grange supports legislation to assure that victims and witnesses of violent crimes must be notified in writing at least 60 days before any and all hearings in which the person who has been convicted of that crime seeks release or a change in release status from either a prison or mental institution. They encourage media groups to be sensitive to the issues involving their coverage of crime and victimization, in order to better respect the privacy of crime victims.

One such effort to increase public safety and community awareness was the National Grange Junior Program's sponsorship of a series of workshops entitled *Stop the Violence*, which were designed for Junior Grange members, with a separate training workshop for adult group leaders. These workshops are conducted in conjunction with the National Grange Annual Convention every year. Resource materials are made available for local adult leaders to utilize in their programs. They are designed to help children recognize, address and control their impulses toward violence and to use peaceful means to resolve differences. They help make children aware of portrayals of violence in popular media and the difference between fantasy and reality. The workshops also address situations

where children may have been a victim of violent behavior by another person (either peer or adult) and attempt to help children restore their confidence and self esteem.

Many award winning Grange Community Service programs address victims' issues and violence preventive measures in local rural communities. Local programs that received national recognition for their commitment to improving rural communities in 1999 include:

- Starting a teen suicide and violence prevention program in Watkins Glen, New York
- Sponsoring a Community Visions program in Midland County, Michigan that identified formation of gang and violence outreach partnerships as one of the top three priorities for volunteer commitment to improve the community
- Providing volunteer and financial support to establish a battered women's shelter in Michigan City, Indiana, including creating and donating more than 200 necessity bags filled with basic necessity articles for women and their families who are forced to quickly leave abusive situations
- Organizing a community drive to make more than 100 stuffed toys for donation to local state, fire and EMT to help calm children who were the victims of traumatic circumstances, including domestic violence in Beach Community, Virginia
- Organizing volunteer and financial support for the Rural Women's Crisis Center in Nampa Valley, Idaho

### **Promising Practices**

Geographical restrictions may hinder the effectiveness and ease of providing services, but certainly does not make quality victims' assistance impossible. Advocates can significantly improve their agencies through training and coordination of services and resources. Programs throughout the nation have made strides in helping to reduce the barriers to quality assistance.

Some surefire ways of improving accessibility and effectiveness of victims' assistance programs include:

- Assessing the scope and level of victim services provided by the campus or community to identify gaps in services and working collaboratively to fill them
- Developing collaborative public safety initiatives and plans for response to crime between campus and community law enforcement, campus leaders and community leaders
- Establishing transportation services, utilizing trained volunteers, as necessary, to enhance victim access to supportive services, medical and mental health services and participation in the justice process

- Expanding outreach efforts to recruit human and financial resources for victim assistance agencies in the community
- Adoption of honor codes to guide students' behavior and values that are directly linked to the morals of local communities
- Sponsorship of activities that empower students to establish honor codes, contribute to crime prevention initiatives and establish peer mentoring and supportive services for students who are victimized
- Establishment and operation of toll-free 800 numbers allow victims to contact VSP without incurring long distance charges. This is an essential service for extremely isolated communities, with a majority of the clients in a service area that requires a long distance call in order to obtain the support they deserve

Many programs also operate satellite offices in an effort to provide victim services to victims living in isolated jurisdictions without transportation. While staffing may be an issue, making services available at a satellite office a few times a week can be a tremendous help.

Some agencies have found that collaborations with rural hospitals are highly effective in identifying domestic violence victim within communities and producing and innovative response to domestic violence through the health care network.

### **Oregon**

Malheur County, OR is a geographically large, culturally diverse, rural county with a small population (30,000) and a high rate of domestic violence, with 102 reported cases in the first six months of 1999. The Domestic Violence Unit was formed to develop immediate response capabilities, a consistent protocol for contacting victims and keeping them involved and informed while their cases are processed and a collaborative relationship with community services that provides victims with ongoing support. Team members included a deputy district attorney, a crisis coordinator and a police officer, who are bi-lingual and trained domestic violence specialists.

The district attorney is on-call to law enforcement 24 hours a day. When a domestic violence incident occurs, he or she stays in close contact with the police officer dispatched to the scene of the crime in order to assess the situation and insure that information on the case is taken correctly. Arrests are made under a mandatory arrest law. Following the incident, the Unit Crisis Coordinator meets with the victim to enhance the safety of the family, to interview potential witnesses and to determine the necessity of a restraining or anti-stalking order.

### **Wyoming**

The Sheridan County Prosecuting Attorney and the Women's Center in Wyoming have combined resources to develop a comprehensive crime victim assistance program in Sheridan County, Wyoming. The town of Sheridan serves as the county center and has a population of 14,000. Including several other satellite

towns, the total population of Sheridan County is almost 30,000, a geographic area that encompasses hundreds of miles, including mountain regions.

Prior to the establishment of the Crime Victim Assistance Program, no services were available for crime victims in Sheridan County, other than those offered by the Women's Center for family violence, sexual assault and child abuse victims. For the most part, these crisis services tapered off when the victim went to court. The Women's Center and the County Attorney felt that victims would be more consistently and thoroughly served with the unique combination of services provided by the Center's experienced staff and the information and space made accessible by the County Attorney's office

The program has increased the range of victim services in the county. Advocacy services are now available to all victims of violent crime. Victims of domestic violence, sexual assault or child sexual abuse have the added benefit of advocates trained to provide criminal justice system information, court escort and other services. Victims of arson, burglary, homicide or elder fraud have a place to turn to for further assistance and support. The program has also increased victim satisfaction with the prosecutor's office and has assisted the prosecutor's office in implementing programs to further protect victims' rights. Recent collaborative efforts have resulted in the development of a comprehensive protocol for the investigation and prosecution of domestic violence and sexual assault cases

### **California**

In California, the Rural Crime Watch program is a service of the California Farm Bureau Federation (CFBF) to assist law enforcement agencies in sharing information about rural crimes. Extensive information is available in both paper and electronic formats on equipment thefts and commodity thefts. Rural Crime Task Force conduct meetings, provide information and tips about thefts and scams and provide information about rural crime prevention programs.

### **Tennessee**

Student interns cover bases in four-county rural Tennessee. Through collaboration with several colleges in the rural, four-county Tenth Judicial District of Tennessee, the Victim/Witness Assistance Program at the District Attorney General's office maintains four offices by relying on student interns to deliver services to victims and witnesses. The student intern program offers academic credit to criminal justice and social service majors, providing them with exposure to the system from the perspective of prosecutors, victims and witnesses. Applicants to the Intern Program participate in a training program at the District Attorney General's office to learn about the role that victims and witnesses play in the criminal justice system and they attend General Sessions Court to learn about court procedures. Interns are assigned to attend preliminary hearings to provide victims and witnesses with up-to-date information on the status of their cases and

to help them obtain answers from the prosecutors to any questions that they may have.

### **Hawaii**

Support from the clergy. The Victim Witness Division of the Office of the Prosecuting Attorney, based in Maui, HI, provides more immediate response to victims on rural Maui and the lesser populated islands of Molokai and Lanai by involving clergy-based volunteers trained in victimization. The clergy has been a natural support group in the rural Hawaiian areas and their participation has improved cooperation and communication between criminal justice professionals, victim services and rural victims.

### **Resources**

National Victim Assistance Academy Training Manual, 2002. Office for Victims of Crime, Washington, D.C.